



Val Kuska, Agricultural Development Agent

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Photographs / Images: Val Kuska; interior view of an exhibit car of the Burlington Profitable Pork special, October 1929; crowds visiting the exhibit train at Burwell

VAL KUSKA,
AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AGENT

BY C. CLYDE JONES

In his 1934 budget recommendations, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Congress to cut \$220,000 from the federal appropriations for dry-land experiment stations and for state extension and research. When Val Kuska, agricultural development agent of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, heard of this, he wrote to the President and urged reconsideration.¹ Kuska quoted from a letter which Roosevelt had written to an Atlanta, Georgia newspaper in July 1932. In that letter, Roosevelt had gone on record as being "forcefully in favor of" agricultural extension and experimental work. Kuska hoped that the President still recalled his earlier sentiments and would do all possible to restore the cut funds. The brashness of

¹ Kuska to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 6, 1934. (This letter and others except those to the writer, are from Val Kuska's personal papers.)

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the Burlington agent in reminding the President of campaign promises paid dividends. Congress voted full appropriations to the state agricultural programs.

This type of positive action characterized Val Kuska's thirty-five-year service to western farming as an agent for the Burlington. In fact, he devoted his entire efforts from boyhood to retirement from the Burlington in 1957 to the cause of better agricultural methods. He was a true "son of the soil."

Valentine Kuska was the son of Czech immigrants. The parents migrated to the United States in 1881, taking up a farm near the Burlington between Milligan and Ohio, Fillmore County, Nebraska. Val was born on February 14, 1887, and his earliest recollections included memories of working on the family farm. His formal education began at the Fillmore County rural school, after which he finished the tenth grade at Milligan High School. Later, he graduated from the School of Agriculture at the University of Nebraska. After college, Kuska joined a group of hardy souls who were heading into the Sandhills of western Nebraska. There he learned about dry-land farming first hand as he helped homesteaders get established. Subsequently he managed farms and ranches in various parts of Nebraska, Wyoming and Colorado. In 1913, he accompanied a brother on a journey across Europe and England where he studied foreign farming methods and gradually acquired a massive understanding of agricultural problems. His experience equipped him admirably to become a farm demonstrator in Madison County, Nebraska, in 1914—a job which was a predecessor of the county agent's work. World War I interrupted his agricultural pursuits but briefly. After fifteen months' service as a volunteer in the U. S. Army, Kuska served as a colonizer for a large Denver land company, helping settlers locate on farms in Colorado. In April 1922, he joined the Burlington Railroad as a colonization agent.²

² Interview with Kuska, December 18, 1950; Kuska to writer, July 21, 1953.



(Photo, 1954, courtesy **The Lincoln Star**)

Val Kuska
Friend of Nebraska Agriculture

A PIG TALE

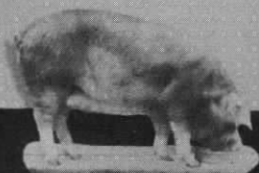
'SHORTY'

THIS TYPE IS
FREQUENTLY UNPOPULAR
GAINS OFTEN SLOW AND COSTLY



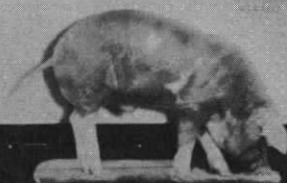
'HAM AND'

THE MEAT TYPE
PROFITABLE BUT LESS
ECONOMICAL GAINS



'HIGH POCKETS'

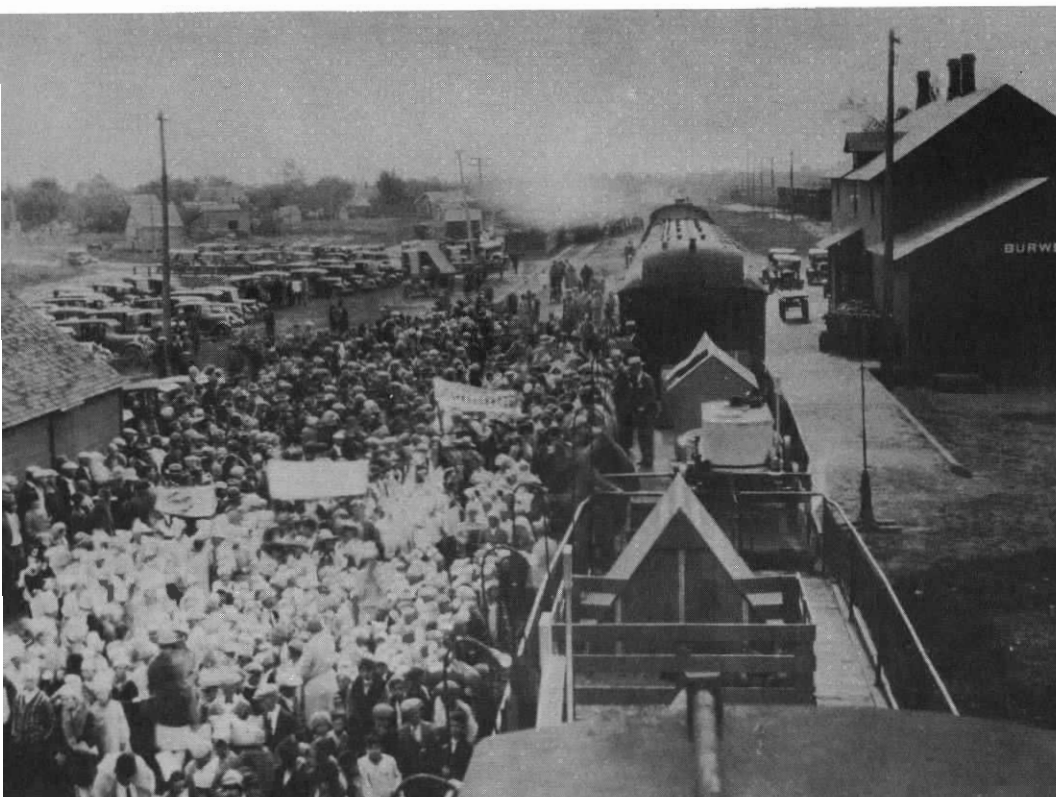
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Above—Inside An Exhibit Car

Burlington Profitable Pork Special, October 1929

Below—Crowds Visit the Exhibit Train at Burwell.



During the first two decades of his work with the Burlington, Kuska served in the dual capacity of colonizer and agricultural development agent. Especially in the 1920's did the railroad direct his primary efforts toward land settlement. He worked with the county real estate boards and with the area organizations such as the Big Horn Basin Colonization Association, helping to prepare and distribute pamphlets and other literature to potential farmers all over the nation. When the Great Depression brought a "return to the land" movement, Kuska spent many weeks in eastern Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota and Missouri, drumming up prospects for Wyoming lands.³

Kuska participated actively in the Burlington's many educational and development campaigns. He helped to plan the educational materials and engaged in the promotional work which always preceded the campaigns. He usually accompanied the special trains which carried the "gospel of better farming" through Burlington territory. As a colonizer and as an agricultural "expert" Kuska became one of the most widely known men in the Plains states.

One of Kuska's greatest interests lay in the promotion of irrigation. From the time he entered the employment of the Burlington in 1922, he worked unceasingly toward arousing greater enthusiasm for irrigation and reclamation projects. He kept in close touch with the Department of the Interior, frequently advising on special problems of settlement on irrigated lands.

Kuska's concern with irrigation rested on the belief that the farming of irrigated lands offered greater inherent stability to agriculture. Furthermore, he conceived a time in the future when the nation would need the productive capacity of the dry-land areas. He prepared statistical

³ For a more detailed account of Kuska's work with the Burlington, see C. Clyde Jones, "The Agricultural Development Program of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad" (Ph.D. thesis, Northwestern University, 1954), Chapter 9.

reports comparing production on irrigated farms with nonirrigated farms, presenting his findings before government investigating committees. Kuska played a prominent part in gaining local, state, and federal support for many reclamation and irrigation projects such as the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District (popularly called the Tri-County Project). The manager and chief counsel for the district, R. O. Canady, remarked in 1954 that Val Kuska's "tireless efforts in behalf of our district were a major factor in obtaining approval of our . . . Tri-County Project . . ." ⁴ R. J. Walters, Jr., director of Region 7, Bureau of Reclamation, Denver, wrote in a letter to Val on his retirement in 1957: "For many years you have been our closest associate, and we shall miss you. You have been the principal instrument in establishing the good relations that exist between the railroad and the regional office." ⁵

Similarly, H. D. Strunk, McCook publisher and president of the Republican Valley Conservation Association wrote in 1952, "I will never forget that back in 1940 and 1941, when we were just getting this program (Republican Valley Development) of ours underway, it was your wise counsel and guidance that steered us past the treacherous shoals. We had a lot of energy, but not too much judgment. The mounting progress which has come in the way of flood control and irrigation in the basin will stand always as a monument to you good guys who found time to lead us wisely. So to you, Val and your other great fellows in the Burlington Railroad, I want to tell you that we are forever grateful and will forever remember the invaluable part you played." ⁶

Such recognition for his promotion of irrigation is but one of many accolades for Val Kuska. Men and women who know him well consider him to be an individual who

⁴ Canady to National 4-H Alumni Award Committee, October 6, 1954.

⁵ Walters to Kuska, March 8, 1957.

⁶ Strunk to Kuska, December 12, 1952.

has simply donated his life to others. M. O. Ryan, National Counsel for the Republican Valley Conservation Association, declared, "No summer has been too hot and no winter too cold for Val Kuska to be in pursuit of some objective which would make Nebraska or other Great Plains States a better place in which to live. He has shared his own technical knowledge with hundreds and hundreds of us laymen and mobilized us as a force to carry on a constructive program of development. Without doubt it is true that the great Burlington Railroad has lent dignity and prestige in his effort through the years. But I want to emphasize that Mr. Val Kuska has brought credit and poise to the Burlington in return."⁷ Fred A. Seaton, Hastings, Nebraska, publisher, now Secretary of the Interior, wrote Val in April 1957, to say, "You are to be commended for the outstanding contribution you have made to your community and the state over these many years through your devotion to the improvement of farm methods."⁸

A typical example of Kuska's tireless service to his home state and to farming in general was the work which he did in Nebraska's Pasture-Forage-Livestock Program. In 1935 he helped establish a joint project of the Extension Service, the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and many other service clubs in Nebraska. The program was designed to restore the balance of livestock, population, and feed supplies upset by the 1934 drought. For the first seven years he served as Chairman of the P.F.L. Committee for the Omaha Chamber of Commerce. He watched the program become an annual event and take on national scope. Frank P. Fogarty, general manager of Omaha's WOW and WOW-TV radio and television station and former president of the Chamber of Commerce, called Val "one

⁷ Ryan to National 4-H Alumni Award Committee, October 4, 1954.

⁸ Seaton to Kuska, April 10, 1957.

of the most aggressive and effective members of the Agricultural Committee.”⁹

Various organizations have formally recognized Kuska's outstanding efforts. On April 10, 1957, Roy Lenwell, KBRL radio station at McCook, called attention to the long and valued work of Val over the past twenty-five years with the South Platte United Chamber of Commerce. That organization presented a plaque in appreciation of Kuska's work, from the days of the Pasture-Forage Livestock program through the drought years and the Tri-County and Republican River irrigation projects. The plaque reads as follows: “Presented to Val Kuska for outstanding contributions in the Field of Irrigation.” The S.P.U.C.C., which Kuska helped organize in 1932, made Val a life member and gave him an honorary position on its agriculture and irrigation committee in April 1955. Kuska was elected to membership in the Nebraska Hall of Agricultural Achievement. At the Wyoming 4-H State Short Course at the University of Wyoming he also received a plaque for “Meritorious Service to 4-H.”¹⁰

Academic people joined in this lavish praise. Dr. Charles A. Lory, president emeritus of the Colorado A & M College, commenting on Val's splendid service to the people of Colorado, said, “His intimate knowledge of extension work in the states served by the Burlington railroad and wide acquaintance with agricultural college people were most helpful to us in Colorado. He has broadened the activities and improved the work of our extension service and has helped to obtain stronger legislative support. He was particularly helpful in broadening the scope of our Boys and Girls Club work and in strengthening our leader training.”¹¹ A. E. Bowman, director emeritus, Agri-

⁹ Fogarty to National 4-H Alumni Award Committee, October 4, 1954.

¹⁰ Kuska to writer, July 4, 1957.

¹¹ Lory to National 4-H Alumni Award Committee, October 2, 1954.

cultural Extension Service, University of Wyoming, wrote, "Val . . . accomplished more than any other man in preventing abolishment of the County Agents' position in Burlington territory. Many times when County Commissioners questioned the value of a county agent, Kuska would go quietly into the County, meet with the commissioners and show them how the county would lose if they did not employ an agent. He always had figures and stories and examples to back up the argument. I think he never failed to assist us in persuading the commissioners to either employ for the first time or to continue the services of a county agent."¹²

W. H. Brokaw, director emeritus, Agricultural Extension, University of Nebraska, and a long-time acquaintance of Kuska, remarked, "I knew Val as a corn club boy long before its development in the broad field of effort of 4-H clubs today. He was an enthusiastic and capable corn club member in the days before he had a county agent or local leader to inspire him. He was a leader even then, for to be a club boy in those days was an indication of leadership . . . His later years with the Burlington as a Colonization Agent placed him in a position to meet and lead business men to see the value of extension and 4-H work. So often when real support was needed to strengthen and maintain extension and 4-H club work and when a better understanding was needed, Val's knowledge of the work and influence was essential to the cause."¹³

E. F. Frolik, Nebraska's associate director of Experiment Stations, wrote, "Val, I want to say that I think you have done an immeasurable amount of good for Nebraska agriculture. One thing I have always appreciated about your work was your excellent attitude and your continued optimism even during the most trying periods. I share in what I know is your basic philosophy which is that Nebraska has a wonderful future. If we can overlook the

¹² Bowman to 4-H Alumni Award Committee, October 12, 1954.

¹³ Brokaw to National 4-H Alumni Award Committee, October 1, 1954.

temporary set backs and some of the day to day difficulties, I am sure that tremendous advancements will be made in our state's agriculture. It is people like you with vision and confidence that will enable us to make progress." ¹⁴

Kuska's contribution to American farming gained a measure of national recognition in December 1954. He was one of eight men and women, chosen from among seventeen million eligibles, to receive the National 4-H Alumni Award. The honor stemmed from fifty years of interest in boys' and girls' farm work. Concerning this award, W. H. Brokaw said, "He has been consistent in all his efforts, but this is particularly true in support of 4-H club work, believing it to be a determining factor in building character for success in life. He has always given constructive support through financial and personal efforts even during the period when Extension and 4-H club work were not fully understood and when it took courage and determination to stand for these things, which are supported willingly and enthusiastically today." ¹⁵

In November 1956, at the annual meeting of the Nebraska County Agents' Association, Val received a certificate of commendation for meritorious public service in the field of agricultural education. The Association felt that his efforts have made it possible for thousands of people to understand better the objectives of agricultural extension service. He and the Burlington Railroad have aided county agents in carrying their educational program to farm people throughout the West. He has fulfilled ably and well the objectives and ideals of agricultural extension activities. ¹⁶

George S. Round, chairman of the Department of Information at the University of Nebraska, published the following in the "Nebraska Extension News" in April 1957: "Val Kuska, agricultural agent for the Burlington

¹⁴ Frolik to Kuska, April 12, 1957.

¹⁵ Brokaw to National 4-H Alumni Award Committee, October 1, 1954.

¹⁶ Kuska to writer, July 4, 1957.

Railroad, has retired after an illustrious career in Nebraska. A graduate of the old school of agriculture, Kuska was one of the early county agents in Nebraska. Later, he went with the Burlington Railroad where he was behind every progressive agricultural movement in Nebraska. His efforts in behalf of irrigation have been outstanding. His 4-H leadership inspiring. His support of the old P-F-L program and similar educational efforts contributed much to Nebraska agriculture. A tireless worker, Val Kuska will be missed as he retires."¹⁷

His Burlington associates expressed similar sentiments. The official announcement of Kuska's retirement by J. B. Lamson, director of the Burlington's Department of Industry and Agriculture contained these words: "During his 35 years of loyal service Mr. Kuska has received national recognition for his outstanding work in development of irrigation and the promotion of 4-H Club work . . . , thus creating many new sources of traffic and lasting good will for Burlington Lines."¹⁸ L. R. Capron, vice president in charge of traffic, claimed that Kuska's record of service had been outstanding. S. L. Fee, vice president in charge of operations, told Val, "You have certainly been a landmark in that part of the territory for a great many years. You have done an inestimable amount of good and you are to be congratulated on your many accomplishments. I think perhaps you are as well known as any man on the Burlington Railroad."¹⁹

Kuska's life story would make a colorful and useful chapter in Nebraska's history. Unfortunately, he was too busy "doing" and did not have time to record most of his experiences. Those accounts of his work which are available in the Burlington's archives indicate, however, that he truly belongs among the great men in the progress of agriculture.

¹⁷ University of Nebraska, "Nebraska Extension News," April 1957.

¹⁸ Circular letter from J. B. Lamson, March 1, 1957.

¹⁹ Kuska to writer, July 4, 1957.